

CPS and Family Group Decision-making

When you are involved with CPS, it is important to have your family, friends, and other support networks helping you through the process.

CPS will help to organize meetings, called **Family Group Decision Making** meetings, where you can invite people you trust and who support you. Sometimes the meeting is called a “Family Team Meeting” and is usually held **BEFORE** your child is removed from your care. A “Family Group Conference” is a meeting that is held **AFTER** your child has been removed.

Your family and friends (your support network) are allowed to attend, and can help you come up with ideas on how you can address any problems you are having, and what you can do make sure your child will be safe at home. This is a good time to set aside old conflicts and to focus, instead, on your child’s needs. Families know their children best and be very helpful in figuring out how the family can solve problems and making sure everyone does what they say they will do. Take advantage of these meetings!

If the other parent has been abusive towards you, you should ask for a separate meeting and support in planning for you and your children’s safety before, during and after the meeting.

A Family Group Decision Making meeting may also be where you work out your Family Plan of Service or your Service Plan.

Family Team Meeting and Family Group Conference are two different types of Family Group Decision Making; both are designed to include families more fully into the process.

Family Team Meeting (FTM)

The family team meetings usually are held before CPS files a court petition for removal, when children are still living at home with their parents. The family team meeting is a way for CPS to decide quickly if safety concerns can be addressed without having to remove your child. Family team meetings are voluntary – you can choose not to attend, but these meetings are a good place for you to tell CPS early on about the kinds of help and support you may need to keep your child safe. In fact, you can request a FTM yourself at any time if you think it would be helpful and CPS has not scheduled one already.

At a FTM, family, friends, and relatives will meet and come up with a plan for how to address the safety concern. You can invite anyone you can think of who may be able to provide you and your child with support. Since there probably won't be a court case going on at this point, you will not be eligible for a free lawyer to assist you at these meetings. However, you always have the right to bring a lawyer with you, if you can pay for one yourself.

Family Group Conference (FGC)

Family group conferences are used more often after your child has been removed and is living away from the home, with a relative or in foster care. A FGC is a large meeting with parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, and anyone else you want to invite; the group gets together and comes up with a plan for how to keep your child safe now and begin making plans for how to keep your child safe once he is returned home.

You should have a lawyer at this point. If so, you will want to prepare with your lawyer for the FGC. Talk with your lawyer about what you want or don't want to have happen. Ask your lawyer to come to the meeting. There may be other lawyers in the room, including your child's lawyer or GAL, and it is better if your lawyer is there with you.

Although CPS will be there for part of the meeting, your caseworker will leave the room at some point to give you and your family more control in coming up with the plan. Although CPS will have to approve the final plan, you and your family can be creative in putting the plan together. You and your family must be willing to hold each other responsible for whatever you agree to in the plan. For example, if you agree not to go to your mom's house to see your children without permission from CPS and you break that promise and visit your children anyway, your mother may have to call CPS or the police, if that's what she agreed to do to hold up her end of the bargain. If the family doesn't follow the plan it comes up with to keep your child safe, CPS can step in and get a court order and things will no longer be in the family's hands.

The FGC meetings can be long, up to four hours or even longer. You can bring a meal or snacks to share with the people who are at the meeting if you think that might help everyone work together and focus longer.

Service Plans

Your Service Plan, also called a Family Plan of Service, is a written agreement with CPS that lists out services you need to complete to address CPS's concerns about your child's safety. A Service Plan includes supports or services that you or CPS think are needed to help you keep your children safe at home, but some of the most common services include:

- Drug and alcohol treatment
- Mental health evaluations
- Parenting education
- Counseling/therapy
- Random drug testing
- Domestic violence shelter and other services
- Legal services

Your Service Plan goes into effect when you sign it. This means that you should agree with everything in it before you sign it. If you are not sure about something, ask your lawyer. But even if you refuse to sign the Service Plan, you refuse to attend a service planning meeting, or your caseworker cannot find you, the court can still order you to follow the plan. Any changes to the plan must also be signed by you or ordered by the court.

A CPS case is a LOT of work! In addition to everything in your Service Plan, you also visit with your child on a regular basis, meet with your caseworker, meet with your lawyer, and go to court hearings. And all of this is on top of going to work or school, or possibly taking care of other children! Keep this in mind when you are talking with CPS about your Service Plan. Be honest about how much you can handle.

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“CPS helped me reach a sufficient amount of pain that led to change.”

– Parent Collaboration Group Parent Liaisons

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I Don't Like My Service Plan

You should be involved in creating the Service Plan. Your opinion matters! If your caseworker gives you a Service Plan without talking with you first, read through the plan carefully. Tell your caseworker if you think the plan includes services that are not needed or if you see any problems that may stop you from completing all of them. If you work weekends, for example, but a certain parenting class only meets on Saturdays, then you probably will not be able to complete that service. Your caseworker needs to know that, but depending on your situation, certain services may be required even if difficult to complete. If the other parent involved is abusive to you, you can request separate service plans.

Even if you disagree with what is included in your Service Plan, completing the services is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY! Your caseworker may remind you about your services, but you should not expect this. On the other hand, your caseworker is responsible for helping you to set up services and for making sure that you can actually begin services in time to be successful. If you are not sure where to go or who to call to start your services, ask your caseworker. If your caseworker is not helping you, contact the caseworker's supervisor. If you still do not get a response, your lawyer may need to step in.



WARNING!

Failure to follow through with your Service Plan is a reason to terminate parental rights under what is called the "O" ground, which refers to one of the 20 different grounds or reasons listed alphabetically in the Texas Family Code that CPS may use to try and terminate your parental rights. Don't let this happen to you! If you are having a hard time finding or finishing services, DON'T WAIT... ASK FOR HELP ASAP!!